

New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1948

Volume IX, Number 28

Rachel W. Coffin, Editor

Week of December 27, 1948

1948 PRODUCTIONS Premiers in Other Years Original Reviews Appeared In These Volumes

1947 Vol.	
Stage Play	Page
Allegro	300
Angel in the Wings	238
Anthony and Cleopatra	255
Brigadoon	427
Command Decision	328
Cradle Will Rock (The)	229
Crime and Punishment	233
Finian's Rainbow	486
For Love or Money	271
Heiress (The)	335
*High Button Shoes	304
Inspector Calls (An)	291
John Loves Mary	465
Man and Superman	308
Medea	295
Mikado (The)	222
Music In My Heart	324
*Streetcar Named Desire (A)	249
Winslow Boy (The)	283
Young Man's Fancy (A)	383
1946 Vol.	
*Annie Get Your Gun	382
*Born Yesterday	466
Burlesque	208
Call Me Mister	403
Happy Birthday	280
1944 Vol.	
*Harvey	95
1943 Vol.	
Oklahoma	341
Voice of the Turtle (The)	199

*Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of December 27, 1948

1948 PRODUCTIONS Premiers During 1948 Reviews Appear in This Volume

Stage Play	Page	Stage Play	Page
*Anne of the Thousand Days	128	*Make Way for Lucia	115
*As the Girls Go	159	Me and Molly	322
Bravo	165	Men We Marry (The)	379
Cox and Box	378	Minnie and Mr. Williams	177
Cup of Trembling (The)	288	*Mister Roberts	338
Doctor Social	348	*My Romance	186
*Edward, My Son	214	Old Lady Says "No!" (The)	342
For Heaven's Sake, Mother!	156	Patience	355
Ghosts	343	Pirates of Penzance	399
Gondoliers (The)	371	Play's the Thing (The)	283
*Goodbye, My Fancy	152	Power Without Glory	390
Grandma's Diary	228	*Private Lives	209
H.M.S. Pinafore	378	Rats of Norway (The)	292
Hallams (The)	313	*Red Gloves	132
Heaven on Earth	240	Sally	271
Hedda Gabler	327	Seeds in the Wind	262
Hilarities	250	Set My People Free	171
Hold It!	274	*Silver Whistle (The)	139
*Inside U.S.A.	279	Sleepy Hollow	258
Iolanthe	397	*Small Wonder	244
*Jenny Kissed Me	112	Story for Strangers (A)	231
John Bull's Other Island	351	Strange Bedfellows	386
Joy to the World	303	*Summer and Smoke	205
Kathleen	358	Sundown Beach	233
Last Dance (The)	367	Survivors (The)	374
Leading Lady (The)	190	Time for Elizabeth	218
Lend an Ear	122	Tonight at 8:30	329, 334
*Life With Mother	182	Town House	224
*Light Up the Sky	148	Trial by Jury	399
Linden Tree (The)	317	Vigil (The)	265
Look, Ma, I'm Dancin'!	364	Where Stars Walk	326
*Love Life	201	*Where's Charley?	197
Macbeth	297	Yeomen of the Guard (The)	361
Magdalena	235	You Never Can Tell	307
*Make Mine Manhattan	382	*Young and Fair (The)	143
CRITICS' CIRCLE AWARD		296	

Theatre Openings

"Jenny Kissed Me"
"Make Way for Lucia"

*Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of December 27, 1948

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK SUN
NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK POST

All Reviews reproduced by permission.
Yearly Subscription \$25.00

Published by CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, INC., 235 East 22nd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

"Jenny Kissed Me"

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune

DECEMBER 24, 1948

By HOWARD BARNES

Leo Carroll in Vestments

LEO G. CARROLL brings a gentle and amiable emphasis to a comedy about parochial problems which has opened at the Hudson. Playing a busybody priest in Jean Kerr's "Jenny Kissed Me," he makes much of a fragile piece, which had something of a triumph when it was presented at the Playwriting Festival of Catholic University in Washington a year ago. The lines do not give his characterization much buoyancy, as he is asked to ponder on a bobby-soxer's remark that he is the Max Factor of the clergy. The situations are strictly stereotyped. But he succeeds in treading that uneasy ground between faith and sacrifice with great good humor.

There is little else to recommend the James Russo-Michael Ellis-Alexander H. Cohen production. Russo has staged the play briskly, after a directorial mishap on the road, but all his random activity does not hide the fact that "Jenny Kissed Me" is a synthetic interpretation of a priest's reactions to the realities of his parish. Kerr puts the good father in a series of embarrassing situations, as he tries to get rid of a ward by marrying her to "a callow youth of twenty" only to discover that she is in love with an understanding schoolmaster. The plot is slight and only occasionally regaling. Once more a star has come to the rescue of a sway-backed drama.

For the star wears his vestments with a combination of dignity and sly maneuvering that would delight the most devout Catholic. He twists the words of his acolyte into making Jenny over from a frump into a glamor girl. He becomes so interested in his Pygma-

lion experiment that he enlists some twenty girls from his western parish into a class which he insists will be devotional. Carroll is never at a loss in wringing humor and even a certain sentimental excitement out of Jenny's final romantic triumph. Too often he is working single-handed on a project that should have had heart and meaning as well as the quips that bolster an affectionate account of a cleric.

Pamela Rivers gives him his staunchest support in the part of the unwanted farm girl, who is misled by her guardian. She is as dowdy in her convent costume as she is radiant in the new look that Father Moynihan suggests for her, in order to get her married and off his hands. Alan Baxter is splendid as the skeptical teacher, who likes Jenny in her old look, and Brennan Moore gives a good account of himself as the youngster who quite rightly wonders why buying a girl a hamburger

'JENNY KISSED ME.'

JENNY KISSED ME, a comedy by Jean Kerr. Staged by James Russo; scenery by Ralph Alswang; costumes by Eleanor Goldsmith; produced by Mr. Russo, Michael Ellis and Alexander H. Cohen, in association with Clarence M. Shapiro. At the Hudson Theatre.

After Moynihan.....	Leo G. Carroll
Michael Saunders.....	Alan Baxter
Mrs. Deary.....	Frances Xavier
Sister Mary of the Angels.....	Sara Tait
Shirley Tinsdale.....	Bonnie Alden
Miss Richards.....	Ruth Saville
Mary Delaney.....	Bette Howe
Nancy.....	Joan Jordan
Owen Parkside.....	Winnie Mae-Martin
Jenny.....	Brennan Moore
A Girl.....	Pamela Rivers
Another Girl.....	Camilla de Witt
Mr. Parkside.....	Dorothy King
	William A. Lee

Time: The present. Place: The living room of St. Matthew's Rectory. Act I.—An afternoon in the fall. Act II. Scene 1.—Five weeks later. Act II. Scene 2.—The following night, shortly after midnight. Act III.—The next morning.

means a proposal. Frances Xavier and William A. Lee have tangential reference to a script which needed far more. "Jenny Kissed Me" is almost all Leo G. Carroll's doing.

The New York Times

DECEMBER 24, 1948

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Having recently been a philosophical waiter and a testy school-teacher, Leo G. Carroll at the moment is a Catholic priest. In "Jenny Kissed Me," which was acted at the Hudson last evening, he paternally directs the love life of a growing girl. As far as Mr. Carroll is concerned, this is an agreeable occupation. For he is a rare comedian in any role, and his transformation out of a crotchety priest into a benign father is gentle, tact-

ful and shining with humor. Mr. Carroll works in a small compass but his workmanship is very fine.

So fine, in fact, that Jean Kerr's comedy seems cheap by comparison and James Russo's direction is hardly more than ordinary stage management. Since Mr. Carroll is playing the leading part, it would be a fitting thing to have Anatole France write the play—in absentia, of course, the way things are arranged around here at the moment.

For the plot of Miss Kerr's comedy is worth a witty telling. Father Moynihan, a vinegary priest, finds his house disturbed by the presence of Jenny, his housekeeper's niece. It looks as though Jenny were going to become a permanent encumbrance unless she is married off to some boy of her age, but she cannot be married off unless she is smartened up in her appearance.

With the aid of the beauty columns of a woman's magazine, Father Moynihan does smarten her up and does marry her off, but not to the boy he regards as most suitable.

Out of a fable as droll as this, a skillful writer with a light touch might pull together a wise and rippling play with some knowledge of the human comedy of ordinary affairs. But Miss Kerr goes through the formula literally in old-fashioned stock company style.

Jenny is a cross between Babe and Peg o' my heart, and her play is a machine-stitched job.

The performance is neatly blended. It is slow, literal and mechanical. Pamela Rivers, who plays Jenny, is an attractive and glowing young lady. She could give an attractive and glowing performance if the direction were the least

bit imaginative. As the studious bachelor who cannot resist Jenny, Alan Baxter gives a performance that may be described as adequate for the same reason. Brennan Moore does more than that. He is cast as a drugstore cowboy—brash and impudent; and he plays the part with considerable invention and humor.

Last evening's audience seemed to take great pleasure in Miss Kerr's good-natured family entertainment. But Mr. Carroll is an artist with style and perception. Out of respect for his acting, this playgoer could not help wishing that the material were less pedestrian in the writing. If Anatole France is unwilling to write it alone, G. K. Chesterton would be a good collaborator. "Jenny Kissed Me" would be a celestial comedy if they wrote it now.

DAILY NEWS

DECEMBER 24, 1948

'Jenny Kissed Me' a Mild Little Comedy Suitable for Amateurs

By JOHN CHAPMAN

A nice little comedy, harmless to all age groups and suitable for playing by neighborhood dramatic clubs, is "Jenny Kissed Me," which was presented at the Hudson Theatre last evening by—count them—James Russo, Michael Ellis, Alexander H. Cohen and Clarence M. Shapiro. As Mr. Churchill might have said, never have so many put so much. There is nothing wrong about "Jenny Kissed Me." It has a pleasant plot, the girl gets the boy and

the cast of characters consists largely of "characters." The "characters" include an amiable priest, a long-suffering housekeeper, an Ugly Duckling heroine, a noble hero and a wisecracking youth. Any neighborhood dramatic club

could scratch up a cast for this layout at one meeting, but Messrs. Ellis, Russo, Cohen and Shapiro have been as careful as possible and have not spared the cost. Thus, we find Leo G. Carroll, one of the best actors in the business, playing the priest as humorously as Jean Kerr's script will permit. We also find a nice setting by Ralph Alswang and a supporting company which always is equal to the mod-

est demands of the author.

A Little Fixing Helps.

Mr. Carroll reluctantly takes into his rectory for safekeeping an 18-year-old orphan girl who is an obvious mess. He correctly decides that some good clothes, a new hairdo and a touch of makeup will work wonders for the girl; his mistake is in thinking that at this date these improvements will make a plot for a play.

Pamela Rivers plays the Ugly Duckling, her one gesture toward looking pathetic being a wrinkling of the brow; Alan Baxter is her

Prince Charming and he is frankly not so hot as a lover. Aside from Mr. Carroll's work, which always is so carefully finished, the only performance which interested me last evening was that of Brennan Moore as a young wise guy. Mr. Moore is a promising new comedian.

New York Post

DECEMBER 24, 1948

Some Kindly Sentiment In Another Mild Play

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

"Gentle" and "amiable" are the words for "Jenny Kissed Me," the comedy by Jean Kerr, which opened at the Hudson last night. They are not bad qualities in life and they even have their value in the theatre, but, if you are a surly fellow, lacking in the spirit of Christmas benevolence, you may demand a play to go with them. In that case, I would hesitate to recommend "Jenny Kissed Me," for, to tell you the truth, it

isn't very good.

To go even farther, I must confess that, although the admission proves I do not deserve the Yuletide blessings, I found the whole thing a well-intentioned bore. I didn't even find Father Moynihan, the unworldly old parish priest who is its central figure, as lovable as the author would have you believe or as the glibful acting of Leo G. Carroll almost makes him. I thought him a selfish and quarrelsome busy-body.

Having made such a sour confession, it is only fair for me to go on and admit that "Jenny Kissed Me" has the sort of artless combination of easy sentiment and modest humor that many playgoers devour eagerly. It is my suspicion, however, that not many of them attend the Broadway drama. Certainly whatever success Mrs. Kerr's play may

have will be due to the character of Father Moynihan, and you have to dig pretty deep to find his heart of gold.

Anyway, the old priest is a gruff but presumably kind cleric, who loves to run peoples' lives and has little capacity for the task. When Jenny, the guileless young niece of the priest's housekeeper comes to live at the parish house, Father Moynihan first refuses to let her stay, then tries to marry her off to a young jitterbug who isn't serious about her, and, only in time for the happy ending, manages to recognize that she is really in love with an older fellow.

The Young Man

This young man who finally wins Jenny is another character that disturbs me. He is a 34-year-old inspector of parochial schools, and he struck me as one

of the oldest, solemnest, most dogmatic-minded 34-year-olds I have ever encountered. There may be a vague hint of "Pygmalion" in the way the priest and the layman try to mold poor Jenny according to their own pedantic ideas of what a young woman should be, but that seems purely accidental.

Mr. Carroll, of course, is one of the ablest actors in the contemporary theatre, and there are pleasant performances by Pamela Rivers as Jenny, Alan Baxter as the sad young man, and Brennan Moore as the livelier parish youth. "Jenny Kissed Me" is undoubtedly full of good

intentions, worthy thoughts, nice sentiments and the milk of human kindness, and its simplicity is disarming. It is also a comedy that makes goodness alarmingly dull.

The Sun

DECEMBER 24, 1948

By WARD MOREHOUSE

A Pretty Trite Comedy.

The drama didn't advance last night at the Hudson. "Jenny Kissed Me," written by Jean Kerr and presented by four showmen seeking to do credit to themselves and give service to the stage, is a sparse and uneventful comedy that hobbles along aimlessly through three acts. It offers several pleasant performances.

Father Moynihan is a fussy and crusty priest, lovable and managing, who becomes suddenly conscious of the bobby-sox world and seeks to fix up and brighten up the serious-minded girl who has

come to live at St. Matthew's Rectory, so as to attract offers of marriage. He even encourages Jenny to go about with a casual young man who has ambitions to

run a filling station, and who is decidedly hep.

But Jenny has a mind and is capable of using it and is in love in the beginning, and all the way through, with Michael, a harried inspector of parochial schools. Eventually, Michael, a doddering 34, finds the courage to speak quite a piece, and the meddling Father accepts his defeat with grace and good humor.

Leo G. Carroll, one of the most facile of our actors, plays Father Moynihan with his usual deftness, but it is a familiar performance along the lines of his characterizations in his last few plays. I'm hoping that Carroll will break away from the pattern when it comes his turn to appear before us again. He is a valuable man in the showshops and he has, on occasion—as in "Angel Street" and "The Late George Apley"—

all the technic of an Arliss.

Pamela Rivers is attractive as the earnest 18-year-old Jenny, who has no desire to become hep, but is subjected to the new-look treatment by the well-meaning and meddling Father. Alan Baxter does all he can with the role of the uncomfortable and indecisive Michael. There is an amusing performance from Brennan Moore as the town rake, who makes the observation that when a fella buys a girl one hamburger she becomes to think he's serious. Frances Xavier bustles about effectively. Ralph Alsang's setting of the living-room rectory is good enough. James Russo did the staging.

There's a school-play quality about "Jenny Kissed Me." Innocuous, unoffending and also very trite. "Peg O' My Heart" was a better comedy.

Daily Mirror

DECEMBER 24, 1948

'Jenny Kissed Me' Happy Yule Gift for Broadway

By ROBERT COLEMAN

On the Eve of Christmas, James Russo, Michael Ellis, Alexander H. Cohen and Clarence M. Shapiro have donned Santa Claus suits to bring us a delightful Christmas present, "Jenny Kissed Me," by Jean Kerr. The new arrival at the Hudson Theatre is what is known in the parlance of show business as "a sleeper." That is, a production which scores a hit without much pre-premiere ballyhoo.

"Jenny Kissed Me" is a charming and heart-warming play about a very human and lovable Catholic priest, who, against his will, takes his housekeeper's young niece into his rectory as a temporary ward, learns about flaming youth through her and

finally sees her happily married.

Father Moynihan was considered somewhat old-fashioned, and even a bit dour, until Mrs. Deazy brought young Jenny to the rectory for what was supposed to be a brief stay. But soon the good Father, like the members

of the first-night audience, fell under Jenny's persuasive spell.

In his endeavors to make Jenny a popular girl, Father Moynihan began thumbing through the beauty advice columns of women's magazines. This not only endeared him to the younger members of his flock, but made him something of an expert—a minor Max Factor—in their eyes.

Though Father Moynihan's plans almost backfired, Jenny eventually became engaged to the likable young inspector of schools; who played chess with the reverend Father and chided him sometimes for his seemingly unprogressive attitude toward education.

Leo G. Carroll gives a magnificent performance as the wonderful Father Moynihan. It is a portrait to cherish. Nothing more beguiling is to be found on the stage, the length of Broadway.

Pamela Rivers, one of our better young actresses, has finally found a role worthy of her ta-

lents. She is a bewitching Jenny. It's about time the Broadway and Hollywood scouts awoke to her merits. Alan Baxter is excellent as the young school supervisor, and Frances Xavier is a most real and amusing housekeeper. Those who know their modern teenagers will revel in Brennan Moore's zany etching of a campus hep cat.

Citations also are due Sara Taft, Bonnie Alden, Ruth Saville, Bette Howe, Jean Jordan, Winnie Mae-Martin, Camilla de Witt, Dorothy King and William A. Lee.

Co-producer Russo has done a first-rate job with the direction. "Jenny Kissed Me" is like a refreshing drink of spring water after too many Broadway champagne cocktails. It proves once again that clean, wholesome comedy can be immensely funny and enjoyable. It can be recommended to the entire family. Parents can take their youngsters to the Hudson, have an hilarious evening, not wonder about explanations later, and encounter nary a blush.

"Jenny Kissed Me"—continued

Journal  American

DECEMBER 24, 1948

Simple-Heartedness Is Carried Too Far

By ROBERT GARLAND

As simple-hearted as I try to be, especially at this season of the year, the simple-heartedness of last night's stop-over at the Hudson was hard to take. In "Jenny Kissed Me," an acting piece made up by Jean Kerr, simple-heartedness is carried much too far.

Finding its way north from Washington's Catholic University, "Jenny Kissed Me" is the sort of theatre thing that should remain amateur until its dying day. Down there in the District of Columbia, or up here at The Blackfriars, its amateur aspect might not show.

Not as plainly as it shows amid the professionalism of Times Square. Whatever simple-heartedness it may have possessed in its original amateur

environment, turns to sheer incompetence in the fine old playhouse on 44th st., east of un-simple-hearted Broadway.

And, as star and featured players, the arduous efforts of Leo G. Carroll, Pamela Rivers and Alan Baxter to seem as simple-hearted as their script are equally hard to take. As hard to take, I mean, as the simple-heartedness of Jean Kerr's "Jenny Kissed Me"...

Professionalism, no matter what its form, just is not right for it!

Infinite Leisure

If "Jenny Kissed Me" is about anything in particular, it is about a Father Moynihan who has his parish in and about St. Matthews'

Rectory. A priest of infinite leisure where his parochial duties are concerned, he whiles away his hours with meddling.

Then, out of a clear sky and off of a nearby farm, comes the Jenny of the kissing. A Peg-o'-My-Heart with guppies instead of puppies, she adopts St. Matthews' Rectory as her abode and Father Moynihan as her protector. His housekeeper is her aunt, or something!

When not studying the homelife of her fishy friends of the family Poeciliidae, Jenny is a great one for reading. In a sort of girlish Mother Hubbard and a sexless kind of hair-do, she most certainly is no glamor girl to catch a young male parishioner's eye.

Nevertheless, two of these young male parishioners, Michael Saunders of thirty-two and Owen Parkside of little more than half his age, are caught and held by our Jen-o'-the-Simple-Heartedness. There is more to her than meets the eye. Of this they are aware...

So mild, very mild, complications simple-heartedly ensue.

A Curious Idea

Just what Leo G. Carroll has

in mind as Father Moynihan is something of a critical-actorial problem. A fine actor in his day and generation, Mr. Carroll's on-stage idea of a parish priest is curious indeed. And that of Jean Kerr, the playwright, is even curiouseer.

The high spot of Mrs. Kerr's Father Moynihan is when he is required to imitate a guppy. And without moving his hands! And the high spot of Mr. Carroll's Father Moynihan is when he is required to open his mouth and breathe through it. And without saying a word!

Alan Baxter, also a fine actor

in his day and generation, could not be unhappier than he is as Michael Saunders. He, however, is not called on for imitations.

Pamela Rivers, a graduate of Elsa Shelley's "Pick-Up Girl," is, as Jenny, not quite as unhappy as Mr. Baxter.

Brennan Moore, as Owen Parkside, and William Lee, as Owen's father, furnish the theatre-piece's only unselfconscious acting. James Russo's direction, Ralph Alswang's setting and Eleanor Goldsmith's costumes are less simple-hearted, and less hard to take, than "Jenny Kissed Me"...

Last night, Jenny kissed me, too. Goodbye, I hope, forever!

New York World-Telegram

DECEMBER 24, 1948

Jennie Kissed Me' a Thin But Wholesome Buss

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Jenny Kissed Me" can stand up to being called inconsequential with no great injury, because it is likely to have a longer life than most sophisticated plays that are more obvious hits.

This is the kind of innocent, amusing and engaging show that, whatever it may do in this original run, will probably be played by amateurs, on tour, and in stock for years to come. It has consistent good humor, and in spite of the fact that it is devoted to the subject of mating, there is not on offensive word or thought in it.

All Likable People.

The people are all likable, and though they have their arguments and conflicts everybody ends up happy and the audience can leave the theater with a fresh clean taste in its mouth.

Though you may fly from the mention of precocious children in theatricals, the precocious 18-year-old Jenny of this case is bound to win you. Having lived practically alone on a farm, she is a great reader and a natural intellectual, with a mind that is open but remains her own.

This is the story of how she reforms a priest who has grown so out of touch with his parishioners that he still goes around muttering about "janky flappers" who are "gin mad."

His housekeeper is Jenny's aunt, a wild character who introduces Jenny into the household before Father Moynihan knows what has happened to him. Before long the place is a wilderness of sweet potato vines and bowls of guppies, and any minute Jenny is likely to bulldoze the conversation with a stopper in Latin.

Mind Over Matter.

Jenny believes physical allure is a superficial waste of time, because she thinks what she puts into her head is more important than what goes on it.

The Father makes his fatal mistake when he decides he can glamorize Jenny so she will get a husband and leave him in peace. There is a moment when he almost ruins her happiness by his self-satisfaction over his plan, but Jenny wins.

The story is not elaborate, but it pleasantly arrives at the final point where Father Moynihan is most comfortably expressing himself in hep cat slang, and planting a charm school for the wall-flowers of his parish.

As you can see there is nothing momentous about all this, and there are several stretches where

the play is hard to pay strict attention to. But the laughs are plentiful and wholesome, and it is an evening spent with nice people, which somehow seems to happen too rarely in the theater these days. It is unfair to call the play old-fashioned, but in the sense of it being entirely a matter of innocent merriment with a wisp of a healthy moral, it is.

Leo G. Carroll is thoroughly at home as the crusty, naive Father Moynihan. He enjoys himself but always with complete professional integrity, and makes a good many platitudinous situations refreshing.

As the Jenny of the title, Pamela Rivers has just the right dairymaid honesty. She performs the difficult job of making you believe a youngster can be more mature than her elders without being impertinent or impatient, and is equally pretty dressed as a farmette or a bobby soxer.

Alan Baxter strives nobly with a tough assignment as the girl's older beau and true love. The part is written colorlessly so he is everybody's straight man, and has constantly to smirk to let the audience know he is laughing while he conceals it from the other characters. It is to his credit that enough charm comes through to let you believe Jenny would choose him.

Brennan Moore shines as the younger swain, a groovy collegian whose conversational pearls fall like pebbles of bubble gum, and Frances Xavier is bustling, cheery and wise as the housekeeper.

"Make Way for Lucia"—continued

New York Post

DECEMBER 22, 1948

'Make Way for Lucia' Mild Little Comedy

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

Although I have never read them, or met anybody who has, I understand that there is an ardent and ecstatic cult that treasures the memory of some novels by the English E. F. Benson about a slightly kittenish matron called Lucia. Among the devotees, it seems, are John van Druten and the Theatre Guild, and the result of the mutual enthusiasm is Mr. van Druten's latest play, "Make Way for Lucia," which the Guild offered at the Cort last night. After seeing it, I am still a little in doubt as to the reason for the capture about the lady.

It is not that "Make Way for Lucia" is a bore or a calamity. Mr. van Druten, one of the ablest craftsmen in the American theatre, is too skillful a playwright to be caught up in anything that is not engagingly done. Indeed, there is much that is bright, playful and quietly amusing in his dramatization of the Benson tales. It is also artfully directed and played, as is usually the case in performances with which Mr. van Druten is concerned. My impression, however, is that it all makes for slender and intermittent entertainment.

The curious thing is that, as Mr. van Druten becomes more and more acclimated as an American citizen, his plays become more and more English. At least, I cannot remember any comedy of his that has been quite as resoundingly British in its humor, viewpoint, characterization and satire. This, heaven knows, is no criticism of it. The only trouble is that "Make Way for Lucia"

seems to depend almost entirely for its appeal on the quaint whimsicality of its picture of English manners in 1912, and that the humor is allowed to run pretty thin.

What plot there is deals with the struggle for power in a country town between Lucia, the newcomer, and Miss Mapp, who was the social dictator before her arrival. Lucia is coy, sweet, prettily disarming and possessed of a whim of iron beneath her gentle exterior. The weakness in her armor is that she pretends to speak Italian, which she actually doesn't know. Miss Mapp is a prying, domineering busybody, who hasn't a chance against Lucia, save that she guesses that her rival isn't really a linguist. In the end, of course, Lucia wins.

It isn't much of a struggle, and Mr. van Druten knows that it isn't. What interests him is Lucia herself, and the by-play of character between his various quaint types, including an amiable fellow of nondescript sex, an amo-

rous colonel, the vicar and his wife, and several garrulous ancients. Occasionally the comedy that emerges is pleasant, in its sly, chuckling way, and the quiet charm of the author's writing is frequently winning. But I couldn't help thinking that the evening was too precious and attenuated for comfort.

The acting is entirely persuasive. Isabel Jeans is skillful in presenting both the charm and the guile of Lucia, while Catherine Willard is highly effective in offering the perfect contrast to her as the vanquished Miss Mapp. Cyril Ritchard plays the gentleman of questionable gender as I suppose he should be played, and Philip Tonge is believable as the colonel. The others help out. Lucinda Ballard's set and costumes add greatly to the humor and charm. Yet I cannot be enthusiastic about "Make Way for Lucia."

NEW YORK STAR

DECEMBER 24, 1948

by John Lardner

Some Cute, Faded, Worn Ghosts

They tell me there are quiet gardens in the neighborhood of Philadelphia where the very mention of the works of Edward Frederick Benson, a coy British novelist of the 1890's et seq., is still good for a nostalgic chuckle. It's a matter of record, too, that the late Alexander Woolcott was a sucker all his natural life for something called *The Dolly Dialogues*.

The Theatre Guild has not revived *The Dolly Dialogues* as yet, but on Wednesday night at the Cort it dragged Mr. Benson into the harsh gaze of Broadway with a play entitled *Make Way for Lucia*. I think the venture teaches a lesson, as follows: when a vogue is dead—except in quiet gardens near Philadelphia—let it lie.

That is probably truer of some vogues than others. Mr. Benson was a facetious writer—the only reference book I have at hand says he came "to the front among the writ-

ers of clever fiction" in 1893, with a novel named *Dodo*—in a damned bad literary period. For the son of an Archbishop of Canterbury, he was plainly quite a kiddie. The stories on which *Make Way for Lucia* are based must have been more than ordinarily precious even for him. Granted they were funny once, they have the effect in revival of a thin, endless joshing of thin, worn-out ghosts. Their tone is too cute and faded, their action too cluttered and creaky, for even a skillful modern playwright to redeem. The skillful modern playwright who proves the point is John van Druten, author as well as director of the Guild's *Make Way for Lucia*.

The Benson stories touched lightly on the lives of certain genteel countryside characters in a village in the south of England, Tilling. They were stories in which plot was clearly meant to be subordinate to character. Given the scope of a

book, or a series of books, I suppose they achieved that result. But Mr. Van Druten has only two hours to work in. In that time, though he sweats like a Trojan to dig them out, his characters are as thoroughly smothered in plot as ever a steak was smothered in onions.

Two ladies are struggling in the year 1912 for social empire in Tilling. Two middle-aged bachelors are involved in their struggle, as well as a number of village landholders, gossips, ecclesiastics, and servants. There is a duel in the plot, and a garden fete, and a picture-hanging for charity, and blackmail, and an Italian musician, and everyone rents his house to someone else for the summer at a profit, in deals in which either the tenant or the landlord—I'm not sure which—is entitled to the garden produce. "It's not the pears—it's the principle," says one of the actors, in connection with horticultural eth-

ics. For my dough, the principle is just as obscure as the fate of the pears.

Pressed for time, Mr. Van Druten paints character with broad slapstick labels. The roguish vicar who affects a Scots brogue ("Sit here, wee wife") might be funny if spread out, but he is highly and painfully concentrated. The dashing widow who pretends that Italian is her spiritual tongue might amount to satire if she were done at full length, but here she is a creature of tags, blurbs, a few quick cartoon strokes.

The two duellists in *Make Way for Lucia* run away from each other. So, many years before, did the two editors in *The Pickwick Papers*, by Dickens, of whom I suspect that Mr. Benson at his best was a pale, languid, and finical imitation. I cannot blame Mr. Van Druten so much for failing to bring him to life at this date as for trying. The play's cast includes some substantial British actors—among them Isabel Jeans, Catherine Willard, Cyril Ritchard, Viola Roache, and Cherry Hardy—who look entertaining in the costumes of the time and have shown in the past that they can be entertaining performers, too, if given half a chance. Which seems to demonstrate that *Make Way for Lucia* is less than half a chance.

"Make Way for Lucia"—continued

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune

DECEMBER 23, 1948

— By HOWARD BARNES —

Yorkshire Pudding

E. F. BENSON'S novels of English village life in 1912 have inspired John Van Druten to compose an observant, but tedious travesty. "Make Way For Lucia," which the Theater Guild has mounted sumptuously at the Cort, examines provincial social snobberies and feuds in a quaint comic strip manner. It is very British. It is also over-long and uneven in mood. At times the satiric touches are so broad that even such accomplished players as Isabel Jeans, Catherine Willard and Cyril Ritchard have trouble in keeping the subject matter in dramatic

focus. There are scenes of rare hilarity, as the lady of the title upsets the etiquette and decorum of a town named Tilling, with its squire, vicar, retired major and indignant old maid. They do not suffice to make the piece very satisfying.

Van Druten has built his plot around the catfight that ensued when Lucia, with a yellow-haired Georgie in tow and pretensions to knowing Italian, painting and music, challenged the authority of a rugged Miss Mapp. He has drawn the Benson characters in bold period strokes and Lucinda Ballard has dressed them with elegance and humor. What he has failed to do was to give pertinence to the wisps of action that carry the production through seven scenes. While some of his dialogue is pointed and witty, much of it is boring as the scene which he is

describing. Lucia's final victory is as feeble as much of the struggling she has to undergo to take over the town.

For one who has not experienced the customs and foibles of existence in a small English hamlet during an almost forgotten era, "Make Way for Lucia" must seem very strange indeed. Since the author has not often given the figures of the play a generally recognizable quality, they are for all the world like animated cartoons out of old issues of Punch. Miss Jeans does wonders in pulling together the threads of the feud, double-crossing her predecessor as the social arbiter of Tilling with a flamboyant portrayal. Her's is a brilliant caricature of a woman of leisure dedicated to running things in even a small orbit of society. When she and Miss Willard have at each other, the scrapping is sometimes amusing. Too many of

the interludes are more literary than theatrical.

Ritchard plays with such affected exasperation as the dilapidated companion of the heroine that she has a bad time of it in the role of Georgie. Viola Roache does a fine bit with a village gossip, who begs Lucia to stay on in Tilling and make life more amusing while Philip Tonge blusters his way through the part of the major. Cherry Hardy, Ivan Simpson, Guy Spaul and Kurt Kasnar are some of those who round out this dramatization of the Benson stories. It is happiest in its decor. Miss Ballard has devised scenery and costumes which give scene after scene more bounce than is to be found in the writing, or Van Druten's direction. "Make Way for Lucia" is old-fashioned, over-emphatic and dull.

Journal  American

DECEMBER 23, 1948

Van Druten Play Is 'Footlighted Fun'

By ROBERT GARLAND

If, as is not the case with me, you are unfamiliar with the somewhat special group of stories from which The Theatre Guild's new Broadway entry is devised, there is no telling just how you will react to last night's arrival at the Cort.

But if, as is the case with me, you know these twittier Tillings as if they were members of your family—God forbid!—John Van Druten's translation of them from page to stage is good mean footlight fun. I revelled in it!

Mr. Van Druten possesses a flair for turning a novel into a play. In the case of "Make Way For Lucia," he has five, six, or seven, novels on which to practice his translatative skill. For E. F. Benson's Mrs. Lucas-versus-Miss Mapp stories are numerous.

Until John Van Druten exposed them yesterday up on the public stage, Lucia and Miss Mapp, Georgie Pillson and Major Flint, Godiva Plaistow and Signor Cortese, the Wysses, the Bartlettas, and Grosvenor, the maid, had been semi-private property.

We who knew them, and, as they reappeared almost annually between the covers of a book, cherished them as if they were our own, shared them like a secret, whispering happily to one another about their giddy goings-on.

Exposed to All

But now, in "Make Way For Lucia," they are exposed for all to see on the show-shop's platform at the Cort.

Although, when translated from page to stage, "Make Way For Lucia" is largely concerned with Mrs. Lucas, who is "Lucia," Miss Mapp, who is her enemy, and Georgie Pillson, whose needlepoint comes naturally, Tilling's lesser Mayfairies are involved.

The play opens with Lucia's arrival in the village. There, she takes over the cottage belonging to Miss Mapp. And, for the time being, Miss Mapp's Major Flint. As goes without reporting, she brings her precious Georgie with her.

The Mrs. Lucas-Miss Mapp war is on. And the Mayfairies of Tilling take sides. At first, they are on the side of Lucia, the newcomer. But, as the war goes on, Miss Mapp comes gradually, but not entirely, into what used to be her own.

Following the example set by E. F. Benson in his stories, John Van Druten is not too unfair to Miss Mapp in his play. His sympathies are obviously with Lucia. But, to keep the battle going, he gives her opponent an occasional uneven break.

Nothing of great moment happens as "Make Way For Lucia" goes on. But if, as is the case with me, you know these twittier Tillings as if they were your own, you find their twittierings good mean on-stage fun. Superbly shallow, as it were.

A blessed relief, I call it, from plays that go down deep, stay down long and come up as dry as Iowa.

Under the translator's direction, "Make Way For Lucia" is cast and acted to perfection. Especially in the leading cases of

Lucia, who is Isabel Jeans, Miss Mapp, who is Catherine Willard, and Georgie Pillson, who is Cyril Ritchard.

Mr. Ritchard's is the most difficult assignment. One false movement, one clinical accentuation, would take his Georgie out of Mr. Van Druten's comedy and put him in Dr. Kinsey's report, where, if you know your Englishmen, he does not belong.

But Cyril Ritchard makes no such move or accentuation. Because he does not, his Georgie is the evening's high-spot. Isabel Jeans is lovely and malicious as the lady bow-wow of the title. And Catherine Willard is equally well-kenned as Miss Mapp.

The surrounding roles are flawlessly projected. Philip Tonge's Major Flint is hilariously Punch-like. The Wysses of Essex Dane and Ivan Simpson are the bla-bla sort of British. The Bartlettas of Doreen Lang and Guy Spaul are Scotch and hearty.

Viola Roache, who jumps from play to musical and back again without apparent effort, is Godiva Plaistow. And, as Signor Cortese, Kurt Kasnar is properly operatic. Lucinda Ballard has done everybody proud with her set and costumes.

As far as I am concerned, Broadway will make way for "Make Way For Lucia." But, then, I know and enjoy its characters.

"Make Way for Lucia"—continued

The Sun

DECEMBER 22, 1945

John Van Druten's 'Make Way for Lucia' Has Premiere at the Cort.

John van Druten has whipped up a bit of fluff and spun it exceedingly well in "Make Way for Lucia," his comedy based on the novels of E. F. Benson, which had its premiere under Theater Guild sponsorship at the Cort Theater last evening.

Van Druten, who gave the town one of its most resounding hits of all time as he wrote most engagingly of young love in wartime in "The Voice of the Turtle," has wandered off into a fragile and artificial realm in seeking to transport Benson's version of southern England of 1912 to the stage, and his play, while amusing enough at moments, gets lost far too often in sheer talk, and

not too brilliant talk at that. And his plot is definitely tenuous when stretched over a whole evening.

The story he is telling is of the arrival in a small village for the summer of a beautiful and youthful widow, one Emmeline Lucas. She is a woman of poses and one of her favorite bits of make believe is a feigned skill in Italian, which has led her to adopt the name of Lucia for

Lucas. For her stay she has rented the house of Miss Mapp who until then had been the town's leading social general. How Lucia proceeds to usurp Miss Mapp's authority in that domain, and how the erstwhile titleholder seeks to battle her way back into command furnishes the major conflict. Some of their clashes—on a perfectly correct plane, of course—strike off some sparks, and chuckles too, but despite the valiant efforts of a skillful cast, mostly English, it is hard to care as much as one should who wins.

Isabel Jeans plays Lucia admirably. She displays a brittle charm, points up her barbed phrases well, and in her moments of real stress brings to the role a human touch, which for the most part van Druten has denied her in his writing. Cathrine Willard as her antagonist, Miss Mapp, does not always attain quite the same light vein, but she proves a worthy opponent just the same. To Cyril Ritchard falls the some-

what thankless task of portraying Lucia's excessively foppish admirer, and if his Georgie Pillson is hardly the most winning stage hero to be found in these parts, the fault does not lie in his acting. Philip Tonge is properly wavering and silly as a retired army officer caught in the middle of the social fight, and Kurt Kasnar brings a refreshing moment of reality to the proceedings as an Italian composer imported by Miss Mapp to overthrow Lucia.

Lucinda Ballard, doubling for the first time as the designer of the setting and the costumes, has contrived an attractive English living room and some gorgeous gowns for Miss Jeans and the others.

Van Druten in his direction has managed to keep the light touch uppermost. As a play, however, "Make Way for Lucia" has the fragility of the Christmas bauble it resembles.

HERRICK BROWN.

New York World-Telegram

DECEMBER 22, 1945

'Make Way for Lucia' Quiet, Colorful Play

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

To understand "Make Way for Lucia" at all, you have to think back before the last two wars, and remember or imagine a group of people entirely secure.

The world at large is a placid place, and in this community no one has any particular financial worries. The idea of what constitutes excitement is docile. In the middle aged group the story tells about romance is no longer urgent, but gossip is.

Social supremacy, water colors and musicales, and the guest list of a neighbor's dinner party, are the breath of life and the plums

of conversation.

Lucia is a charming and artful phony. A monied widow, her chief pretensions are showing off her smattering of Italian, playing Beethoven and portraying the leads in tableaux. In the summer of 1912 she has moved her foppish friend George and herself from their home town to a neighboring English village. This permitted most of their new acquaintances to switch houses as a gay change for the season, with the result that everyone but Lucia is making a profit.

Lucia is accustomed to queening

it over her associates, and the play shows how she faces new fields, and in particular her landlady, Miss Mapp, whom she must dethrone.

Their feuds and plots involve the cream of the village. There are arguments about jumble sales, and art exhibitions and garden fetes. The battle swings from Lucia's advantage to Mapp's and back again.

Everybody dresses to the teeth to go calling or receive. Everybody wants to be first to collect and spread the latest news. All of them are childish and indulgent, most of them are pleasant, and none of them is very interesting.

From a fair acquaintance with the "Lucia" novels of E. F. Benson, the play seems an excellent adaptation of the stories. The reason it is not hardy theater lies in the essential significance of the people.

Their lives are basically trivial. If anything important happened to them and aroused big emotions they would cease to be the same. The function of the characters is to portray a life untouched by harassing influences, which they cannot do and be dramatic. The play is of course a comedy, but

these people cannot be witty or they would be false because their cleverness is limited.

Incidents swirl around without causing more than a fairy tale conflict. The effect is of a long warm lazy afternoon beside a tennis court on which nobody put up a net.

Isabel Jeans is graceful and confident as the attractive Lucia, an unshakably feminine adversary as she delivers her rapier thrusts with a prunes and prisms smile.

Cathrine Willard lets Mapp's little world teeter on the edge of catastrophe with great comic effect, and is just as adept at making her cancel her own advantages.

As Georgie the dandy, Cyril Ritchard plays with crisp comic decision that gives this negative character more individuality than any of his associates. Viola Roache and Philip Tonge reliably cull laughs of their roles as friends of Mapp won over by Lucia, and Kurt Kasnar has a bright scene as an Italian composer.

The play is exquisitely dressed, with the wonderfully elaborate costumes of Lucinda Ballard making the stage a whirl of hush color and elegant line.

Daily Mirror

DECEMBER 23, 1948

'Make Way for Lucia' Is Pleasant, But a Bit Thin

By ROBERT COLEMAN

There is much about "Make Way for Lucia" that is charming, but not quite enough. It is easy to see, however, that it must have been tempting for Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner to have embraced affectionately the new John Van Druten script when it came to their Theatre Guild offices.

The novels by E. F. Benson, on which the play is based, are delightful. And what Van Druten has carved out of them for the stage is equally pleasant. But he carved his materials too thinly. There just isn't enough roast beef in the new arrival for American audiences. And American audiences do not settle for

tea sandwiches gracefully.

"Make Way for Lucia," which arrived at the Cort Theatre last evening, brings the irrepressible Mrs. Emmeline (Lucia) Lucas to the English village of Tilling circa 1912. There she vies with Miss Mapp for social leadership. The contest develops several diverting moments, though hardly

sufficient for a completely rewarding evening.

In penning and directing "Make Way for Lucia," Van Druten has tended toward ultra-stylization. In our opinion, the central character of Lucia should have been highly stylized, but the other roles should have been less so, to achieve greater contrast. Naturally, Van Druten was thinking of his play in terms of a whole. He was keying all of his people to a mood, but in so doing he has detracted from the importance of his central figure.

The Van Druten script has a high time of satirizing the elegant and persuasive Lucia, but there isn't a single inhabitant of Tilling who has the common sense to see through her for the amiable fraud that she is. In other words, there is no conflict between sanity and theatrical flamboyance.

Isabel Jeans etches an enchanting portrait of Lucia within the frame designed by Van Druten.

Cyril Ritchard is admirable as the delicate Georgie Pilsdon. Catherine Willard is a formidable Miss Mapp. Philip Tonge is excellent as the obtuse and verbose Major Flint. And Viola Roache is first-rate, as usual, as the bosomy and gossipy Godiva Plaistow.

There are also helpful contributions by Cherry Hardy, Ivan Simpson, Essex Dane, Guy Spaul, Doreen Lang and Kurt Kasznar.

The set by Lucinda Ballard is definitely superior to the costumes by Lucinda Ballard.

"Make Way for Lucia," in sum, is likely to find but a limited audience for its precious and mannered humor. It is an erratic comedy shot that probably will soar right over the heads of Mr. and Mrs. Average Playgoer. It is a cream-puff, and successful show-shops must serve their customers chops and steaks today.

DAILY NEWS

DECEMBER 23, 1948

'Make Way for Lucia' Is a Stylish And Acrid Comedy about Women

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In her pleasantly garrulous book about the lecture business, "It Gives Me Great Pleasure," Emily Kimbrough tells of a little girl who felt compelled to contribute a nugget of conversation after a luncheon among grownups. The moppet's offering was, "There are a kind of dog with two rows of buttons on its stummick." This declaration, so direct and yet so delicate, is a ready-made description of the two women adversaries in John van Druten's new comedy, "Make Way for Lucia," which the Theatre Guild presented at the Cort last evening.

Working from some novels by one E. F. Benson, none of which I know about, Mr. van Druten has fashioned an acid, nasty and delightful comedy about the war be-

tween two ladies over social domination of a small English town. In it Catherine Willard and Isabel Jeans are giving acid, nasty and delightful performances, and in it also Cyril Ritchard is presenting a hilariously prissy portrait of a well-bred but undersexed swain.

The period which has been selected for the play is around 1912—mainly, I think, because men's and women's costumes of the era now look funny. Actually, neither the period nor the place makes much difference, for the war between women is universal and timeless

and the weapons are always the same. In the jungle a feline may bare its claws, but in the drawing room it is the velvet paw which kills.

Deftly Done and Played.

There is not much plot to "Make Way for Lucia" and it makes no matter anyway, for the charm of Mr. van Druten's comedy is in how it is done, not why. It is done deftly and with keen observance as it tells how "Lucia" Lucas and Miss Mapp wage their bloodless but anguishing campaign to be top dog (the kind with buttons) in such community affairs as art exhibits and charity garden parties. It reminds me of some of George Kelly's fine high comedy,

and without being at all displeased with the Theatre Guild's cast I kept wishing last evening that Ina Claire had been in there.

Miss Willard is the more forthright of the antagonists, and Miss Jeans is the clever one, and they both are great fun. Mr. Ritchard, with his prancing walk and his eagerness to please the ladies, is an amusing aesthete. His timing and his judgment about when to play broadly and when not to are the mark of an intelligent and capable actor.

Among those who become embroiled in the campaign over the village of Tilling are Philip Tonge, playing the monocled silly-ass Britisher with proper style; Viola Roache as an inquisitive matron, and Cherry Hardy as a maid-servant who actually contributes something to the comedy of the evening. Miss Hardy, in a modest role as all maidservants must be, looks as though she had been drawn by Mary Petty and is a fine high-comedy helper.

Mr. van Druten has directed his play with taste and style, and Lucinda Ballard has made the set and costumes with a proper eye for taste, style and humor. "Make Way for Lucia," being the season's first good drawing-room comedy, is a needed addition to a playgoer's list.